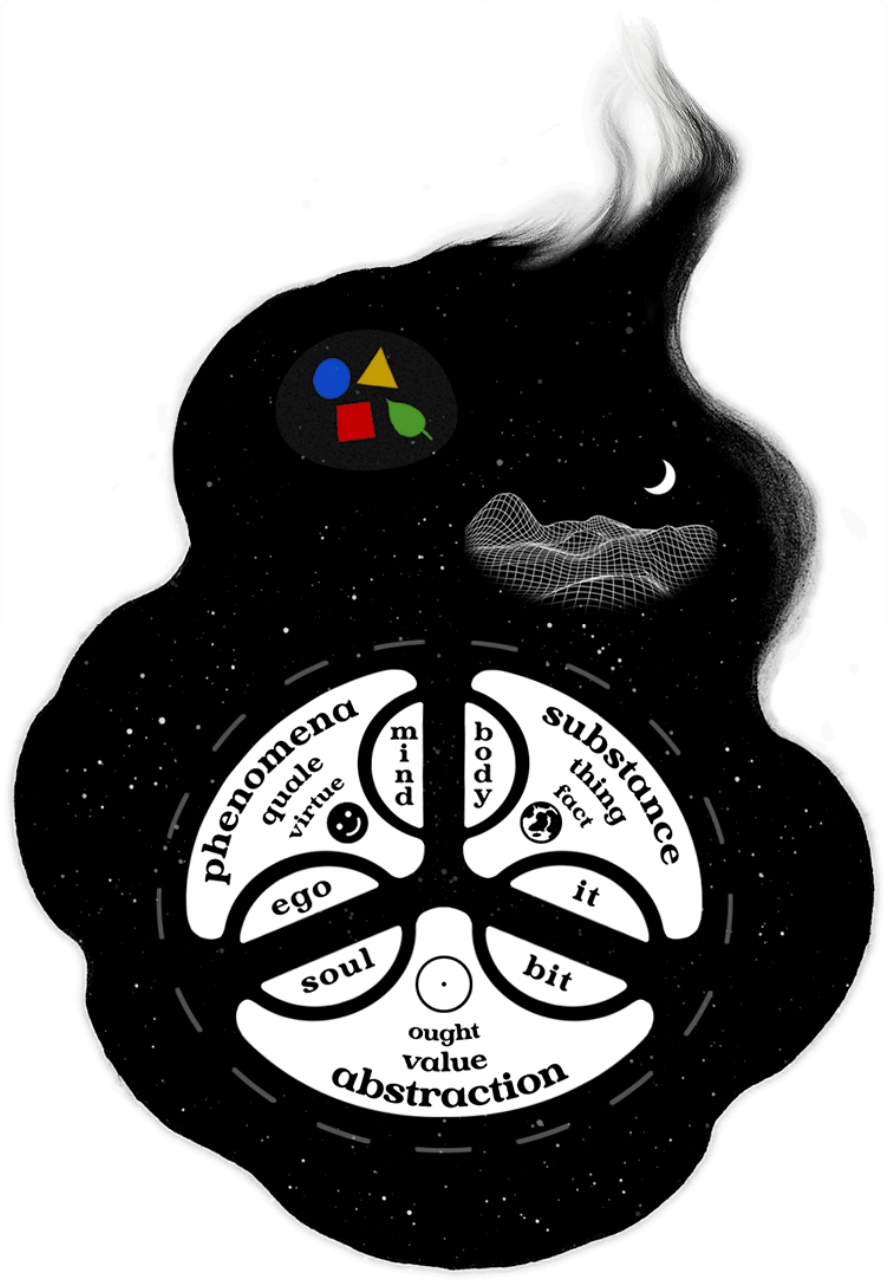
QUALINGUA

The natural language of consciousness



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The Death Of Mystery

“Ah, not with knowledge is Wisdom bought;
And the spirit that soareth too high for mortals
Shall see few days: whosoever hath caught
At the things too great for a man’s attaining,
Even blessings assured shall he lose in the gaining."
- Euripides, The Bacchae

Western philosophy so often holds mystery as one of three species: A bride to be laid bare, a phantom to be extinguished, or the elusive hermit who never reveals their witchy secrets. But the artists have always known mystery as a mother, father, neighbor, and friend. And they know that when you turn your back on mystery, you make yourself vulnerable to its wrath.

At its festival debut in 405 BCE, a year after Euripides' death, *The Bacchae* won first prize for the tragedian. It tells the story of two cousins: The god of wine, Dionysius, disguised in human form, returning to Greece from Asia Minor; and the recently crowned king Pentheus, whose name means *man of sorrows*. Dionysus is displeased both with his cousin’s refusal to honor him among the gods and with the tarnished reputation given to his mother, Semele (a Mother Earth figure from Asia Minor, repurposed by the Greeks).

Dionysus first attempts persuasion with Pentheus, hoping he might be, as Yeats later reimagined, the “proud dreaming king who flung the crown and sorrow away,” to dwell “among wine-stained wanderers in deep woods.” But Pentheus, disdaining the mischief and ecstasies of wine, refuses. Neither can the sage Teiresias convince the young king that Dionysius and the Earth goddess Demeter are mankind’s “two supreme blessings,” and he accuses Pentheus of being “drugged with madness” for refusing to glorify the mysteries of wine.

Euripides' Chorus asks: “What is wisdom?” They tell us it is “not what the world calls wise;” it is “humility, an unrebellious soul,

accepting all." The tragedian comments on mistaking knowledge, order, and power for wisdom.

Socrates likewise expressed that "human wisdom is worthless" and, rather, "wonder is the feeling of a philosopher." But then his student Plato characterized wisdom as comprehensive knowledge of all scientific domains. For Plato's student Aristotle, "philosophic wisdom" is concerned with what is merely "divine, but useless." And perhaps it is common in Western philosophy that a "love of wisdom" is substituted with an appetite for certainty or dominion. And maybe this gets philosophy into a lot of trouble.

Phenomenally Old

Today, the internet is saturated with popular videos of intellectuals debating the nature of consciousness. Most subscribe to the 17th century Descartes-origin story of the "mind-body problem," the question of how mechanical brain function produces our mental phenomena. "I think, therefore I am," and later, "I doubt, therefore I am," Descartes mused at the conclusion of his journey to self-discovery. But in ancient Greece, we find Western proto-phenomenologists wrestling with the same problems and beguiling intuitions that we puzzle with today.

In his *Timaeus*, Plato proposed that when physical matter encounters the sense organs, a *pathēma* (physical excitation) is generated and moves to the brain to become an immaterial and irrational *aesthēton* (sensation) like a color or scent, experienced by the conscious soul and subsequently accompanied by a *doxa* (discernment) which distinguishes one aesthēton from another. It was a description as good as any of what we today call *qualia* – those seemingly raw and intrinsic qualities of perception, like *greenness* and *coldness*. His notion that consciousness is real but distinct from physical reality is now called *dualism*.

Aristotle decided the brain was only a pink radiator for cooling blood, and so struggled with an intuition we today call the

combination problem of consciousness: How do individual sensory experiences unify into a singular first-person experience? The sensations must meet together in the biological heart, he wrote in *De Anima,* where they form a "common sensation." He also sought an explanation for his intuition that consciousness is "aware of itself." He reasons that positing an extra *meta-sense* would lead to an infinite regress of extra meta-senses, and concludes that consciousness must have intrinsic self-aware subjectivity.

But for all these intuitions, Aristotle also determined that the "sensitive soul" of phenomenal experience must be, somehow, existent within the space of the body, leaving only the "rational soul" as an immaterial essence. This was an important step toward the metaphysical position we now call *physicalism:* Everything that's real must exist physically.

Aristotle, however, expressed disagreement with the radical physicalism of his contemporary Democritus, who said "only atoms and void are real" and that so-called sensations are merely "conventions" of communication. Still, Democritus struggled with a conundrum that physicalists face today: If sensory experience isn't real, how can we know anything? He eventually decided sensations must have some kind of primacy, but left this ontological ambiguity unresolved.

In 1874, John Tyndall gave a timeless assessment of the mind-body debate: "You cannot satisfy the human understanding in its demand for logical continuity between molecular processes and the phenomena of consciousness."

The Natural, Artificial, And Eternal Aporias Of Consciousness

In the early 20th century, philosopher Nikolai Hartmann developed a critique of metaphysics, rooted in the notion of *aporias (singular, aporia),* problems which seem intractable. He believed philosophy should mainly be concerned with the *natural*

aporias of life — those problems which demand our practical attention. He argued that when we take "systemic" metaphysical positions which attempt to unify all fundamental claims about Reality, we generate unsolvable *artificial aporias* which can distract or confuse our work.

The mind-body problem may be an artificial aporia when held in competition between metaphysical positions, but also a natural aporia when ethical questions about consciousness arise. Let's call this an ***eternal aporia*** — the kind of mystery which is worth attending to, but cannot be finally resolved.

Nicholas Rescher (1987) developed the concept of *apories (singular, apory),* an "inconsistent set of otherwise plausible propositions." His prescription for addressing apories is a dialectical process which holds all propositions as provisional, identifies the core of their inconsistencies, and resolves them by eliminating or modifying those propositions deemed as least plausible within "the larger scheme of things."

Unfortunately, metaphysical disagreements about consciousness have to do with the *scheme of reality itself,* touching upon fundamental epistemic and ontological assumptions, and leaving plenty of room for disagreement about which assumptions are weakest.

I'll suggest the pragmatic theory of logician Charles S. Peirce (1878) can complement our critical aporetics with, for want of a better term, a *positivist aporetics*. Rather than identify weakest propositions, we can identify the strongest propositions as those which are most meaningful, and then eliminate or modify other propositions in order to retain maximal meaningfulness. Peirce's *Maxim of Pragmaticism* offers a measure of meaningfulness: "To ascertain the meaning of an intellectual conception, one should consider what practical consequences might result from the truth of that conception—and the sum of these consequences constitute the entire meaning of the conception."

While helpful, Peirce's maxim must contend with Karl Popper's maxim: For the project of scientific knowledge, a concept's *falsifiability* holds hostage all other consequences. If there's no opportunity to falsify a concept, we can use it to justify any number of subsequent unfalsifiable concepts, delivering us into a black hole of aporias that may fundamentally upset our entire program of scientific research.

Consciousness theorists, however, may be more or less committed to scientific falsification and empirical inquiry generally, and thus have strongly diverging opinions about how meaningful an unfalsifiable proposition (such as those related to non-physical consciousness) might be. That is, a concept's meaningfulness depends on one's interests.

The Psychology Of Theories Of Everything

In 1907, psychologist William James wrote, "Temperament is a factor in all philosophizing," and posited two fundamental archetypes of philosophical temperament:

> "THE TENDER-MINDED
> Rationalistic (going by 'principles'), Intellectualistic, Idealistic, Optimistic, Religious, Free-willist, Monistic, Dogmatical.
>
> THE TOUGH-MINDED
> Empiricist (going by 'facts'), Sensationalistic, Materialistic, Pessimistic, Irreligious, Fatalistic, Pluralistic, Sceptical."

More recently, psychologist Daniel Kahneman has popularized the idea of *System1 and System2 thinking,* where System1 thinking is when our temperament informs our speedy conclusions; System2 is the slow, logical development of arguments that support or extend our temperamental conclusions.

How shall we get beneath our temperaments, such that we can evolve our fundamental assumptions? We have a clue from the first Greek thinker to call themselves a philosopher (lover of wisdom) and eschew the title of sophos (wise man). On the nature of philosophizing, Pythagoras is attributed by Diogenes Laërtius as having "likened life to the Great Games — that some people go there to compete, others to make money, and the best people go to observe."

There is much competition today among metaphysical theories, and temperaments are on display if we take care to notice them. It is not always easy to keep ourselves from getting caught up in the passion of the debates, but let us try to maintain the philosophical mode of observation.

My task, in gist: Review the major positions related to the mind-body problem, identify their most salient aporias, lay out a pragmatic psychological setting for exploring new syntheses, and present such a synthesis. Along the way, I employ some novel concepts (bolded) to help us organize our thoughts.

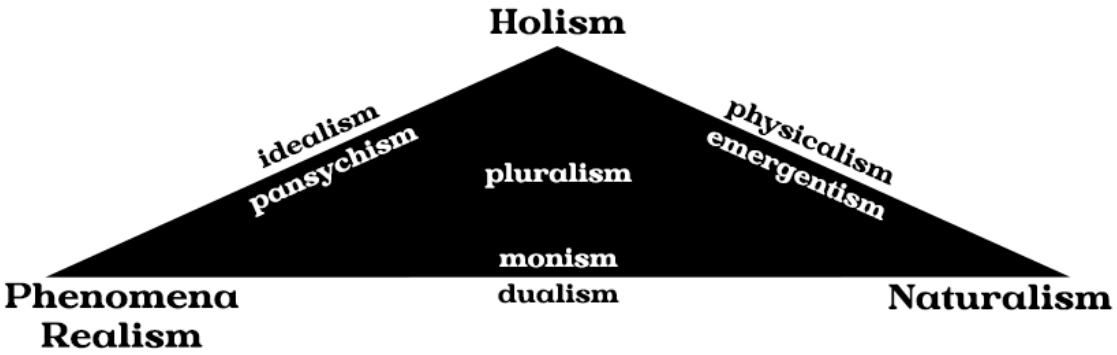
We're exploring whether millennia of phenomenology, consciousness studies, and science have dealt us a dead man's hand or a royal flush — there's not much middle ground when making claims on the fundamental nature of Reality. We have it all figured out, or we haven't.

As a disclaimer, and continuation of the metaphor:

More rare than a royal flush is a royal flush dealt in sequential order, from ten to ace. Likewise, our exploration will build a collection of arguments that don't always flow with perfect historical continuity from one to the next, but eventually we'll bring our arguments together and play our hand. The metaphysical dealer within each of us will decide what the hand is worth.

The Bermuda Triangle Of Consciousness

There have been some proposals of an “inconsistent triad” faced by consciousness researchers — most notably by Jaegwon Kim (1993) — wherein only two of three propositional commitments can be consistent with each other. Here, I’ll construct a more general trilemma which approximately coordinates popular Western metaphysics in relation to the vertices of three main commitments, defined below.



Holism: There is only one ultimate Reality, everything “real” belongs to that Reality, and there is some relationship, however remote or subtle, between everything which is real. Thus, we should strive for unified conceptions of Reality and its parts.

Phenomena Realism: Our phenomenal (or conscious) experience, though it seems governed in part by nonphysical laws, is real.

Naturalism: The limits of the observed natural world are the limits of existing reality, and any unexplained phenomena should seek explanations without appeals to supernatural powers or causes.

We see how these commitments form an apory, where the physical laws of nature and the nonphysical laws of phenomena prohibit a jointly holistic conception of Reality.

Along the perimeter of our triangle are the basic metaphysical positions which reject the commitment at the opposite vertex. The idealist, for instance, rejects naturalism and posits consciousness

as the fundamental of Reality, with the universe originating from one or more primitive conscious entities, often a “universal mind” or deity.

Adopting these positions may resolve the triadic apory, but they come with internal aporias. Idealism struggles with “one-to-many” problems, dualism with the mind-body explanatory gap, physicalism with the question of free will and the popular conception that consciousness is, indeed, real.

Moreover, in abandoning its opposite commitment, each position risks abandoning natural aporias which motivate those commitments. Physicalism, for instance, makes it difficult to address ethical intuitions about the intrinsic value of consciousness and any systems which we believe “have” consciousness.

Inside the triangle we find syntheses which attempt to satisfy all three commitments, but I’ll argue that they are unsuccessful and burden us with additional artificial aporias.

The Crucible & The Zombie

One of the most common “System1” communication problems is that of indexicality. When I ask your opinion on “consciousness,” are we talking about the same thing? Often, we are not: I’m talking about my cognitive capacity, you’re talking about an ethereal *felt sense,* and a third person is talking about observable brain activity, or any number of concepts related to mind, self, and experience. We’d have to slow down to make sure that my index for “consciousness” matches your index.

Philosopher David Chalmers might help us with this problem by distinguishing between his famous *hard and easy problems* of consciousness. Easy problems deal with properties or states of consciousness and how they correlate to observable brain activity.

The hard problem addresses the existence and causes of *consciousness itself*.

Well, what is consciousness itself? For *consciousness realists* who believe that consciousness is both real and non-physical, definitions don't come easily. Chalmers deploys concepts like the "intrinsic nature of a sensation" — the self-evident *greenness* of the color green — to express something about the essence of consciousness. Philosopher Thomas Nagel famously argued that consciousness has non-physical properties like "a single point of view," irreducible *subjectivity,* or *what-it-is-likeness*.

To coin a term, let's say that consciousness realists appeal to ***cryptoessentialism,*** a belief that consciousness has essential properties which are apparent to the conscious agent but are "hidden" from the physical dimension of reality. And for purposes *infra,* let's coin the heuristic ***Chalmers' Crucible,*** wherein the concept of consciousness would be purified down to its cryptoessential properties as needed.

Perhaps it is because these cryptoessential properties can't be scientifically falsified that Chalmers defends his mind-body dualism with an attack on the physicalist position. His famous "zombie argument" asks us to imagine a world, just like this one, except that nobody is having a conscious experience. He then pursues a chain of deductive reasoning to arrive at his anti-physicalist conclusion.

Chalmers' premise, however, suffers from a System1 error and upends his argument: What does it mean to "conceive" of a person having, or not having, a non-physical conscious experience? If a single-point-of-view is essential to my consciousness, and all conception happens within my consciousness, I cannot imagine someone else's consciousness, nor a lack thereof. Chalmers speedily mistakes mere *positing* for *conceiving*, which breaks his chain of conditional reasoning — a popular criticism which has been made from other angles.

Elsewhere, Chalmers expresses the sway of System1 thinking when he explains his affinity for the *panprotopsychist* position on consciousness: "I think that in some ways the [panprotopsychist] view is the most appealing, but this sense is largely grounded in aesthetic considerations whose force is unclear," he writes in *The Character of Consciousness*.

I mention these two anecdotes to highlight the role of psychology in consciousness studies. If we are naturally drawn to metaphysical mysteries, and if greatly exhausting all careful deliberation doesn't bring us to a clear resolution, what do we have left but our feelings to help guide us through uncertainty?

The Quicksand & The Obvious

As Chalmers is the present-day champion of dualism, the late philosopher and cognitive scientist Daniel Dennett has been its greatest foil. Dennett's argument, *illusionism,* insists that consciousness simply isn't real, and any first-person report of experiencing *greenness* is just a brain *thinking* it has an experience of greenness. Qualia, he says, "refers in the end to no properties or features at all," (1988).

If you had an intuitive understanding of Chalmers' and Nagel's appeals, you may find Dennett's position strange or frustrating. *What does he mean there's no greenness? What could be more real than my experiences of color and sound and taste?* We might also invoke what's known as the "meta-problem" of consciousness: *If consciousness is an illusion, why would we even be talking about it, and often with such conviction?*

Dennett, like Dorothy's Toto, would like to pull the curtain back and expose our brains as very bad wizards, caught up in false projections about phenomenological reality. Everything we say about consciousness can be explained by neuronal activity and evolutionary forces, he argues in *Consciousness Explained*. Any convincing sense of subjectivity is the brain's "user illusion," and

qualia are ineffable precisely because our cognitive architecture can't capture the deeper complexity of brain functions.

Let's call this body of argument ***Dennett's Quicksand,*** because the more you defend against it, the more you sink into it. Every counterargument is yet another symptom of the illusion of consciousness.

We might be tempted to avoid both the Crucible and the Quicksand by putting the hard problem aside and focusing on the easy problems of brain-consciousness correlations. But we'd soon find ourselves confronting ethical aporias about free will, meaning in life, suffering, and the intrinsic value of other conscious beings, which demand that we reckon with our positions on consciousness and science.

Typically, the illusionist's aporetic strategy is rooted in empirical inquiry and wants to eliminate *consciousness realism* as the proposition which is "most weakly evidentiated" (Rescher, 2009). The dualist and idealist's aporetics are rooted in speculative philosophy and want to eliminate physicalism as lacking "explanatory fertility."

A closer look reveals that both positions fail to meet their own standards. What would it mean for a physicalist to find some final piece of evidence that proves there is nothing beyond the physical world? And how can the dualist explain consciousness if there's no understanding of causality outside of the physical world?

Meanwhile, because of the non-physical nature of consciousness, because the brain is the most complex system in the known universe, and because of the speculative nature of evolutionary theory, Dennett's and Chalmers' arguments are both very hard, if not impossible, to falsify.

Instead, both positions make **arguments from obviousness,** as all philosophy eventually must. Dennett promoted "Illusionism as the obvious default theory of consciousness" until proven otherwise (2016). Chalmers joked that Dennett might be a non-conscious

zombie because, for anyone who is conscious, it's just *obvious* that consciousness is real. Dennett played along, responding, "We're all zombies. Nobody is conscious."

What else can we do but make jokes when the debate is reduced to a clash of starting points and, as William James characterized the history of philosophy, "a clash of temperaments."

Synthetic Solutions

There are some classic and popular attempts to resolve the consciousness apory without fully abandoning any of the three commitments.

Ontological emergentism conceives of new metaphysical substances or causal powers emerging from those already existing. Chalmers is sympathetic to this view and argues consciousness would be the only "clear case" of such. This position fails to close the explanatory gap as it admits the need for revolutionary "psychophysical laws".

Dennett argues for *epistemological emergence* — emergent information, patterns, and computation in the physical world. The argument serves to resolve, in part, the dilemma of free will, moral agency, and reductive physical determinism. He wants to insist that humans, as informational patterns, can compute beliefs and intentions which are "not reducible in any meaningful sense to the lower-level patterns at the physical level." But the argument is semantically slippery, as he elsewhere insists that "When mechanical push comes to shove, a brain was always going to do what it was caused to do by current, local, mechanical circumstances."

More recently, neuroscientist Erik Hoel has developed an emergentist theory and heuristic about "effective information" called *Causal Emergence* (2025). But he clarifies that this emergence can take place in "a world where everything is totally

reducible." For Hoel, the causal power of effective information is found in a system's "macroscales" which are "higher-level descriptions of a system." Like Dennett, Hoel slips between a dualism of informational and physical conceptions of "causation," thereby creating a new explanatory gap. And as a consciousness realist, he maintains that current theories of consciousness are scientifically unfalsifiable (2021).

Another popular synthesis is *panpsychism,* which can also be understood as two popular kinds. *Micropsychism* claims that consciousness is woven into physical reality, with fundamental particles carrying rudimentary consciousness. *Cosmopsychism,* closer to idealism, instead posits a single "great mind" or field of consciousness that undergirds Reality. Philosopher Philip Goff is a prominent panpsychist, arguing that physicalism has stalled while panpsychism "has essentially solved all the mysteries" (2023).

Goff sometimes defends micropsychism but acknowledges its limits, particularly the "combination problem": How do particle-level experiences combine into the unified consciousness of a human subject? In his 2009 and 2024 papers, *Why Panpsychism Doesn't Help Us Explain Consciousness* and *How Exactly Does Panpsychism Help Explain Consciousness?*, he abandons micropsychism and turns to a "hybrid cosmopsychist" stance. This model suggests that the universe as a whole is conscious, and that under certain conditions — such as within a brain — phenomenal aspects of the larger reality are "transferred" to a localized conscious sub-entity.

How does all this work? Goff offers little more than promissory notes about future scientific solutions, without clarifying how science could even approach them. And he is explicit that his cosmopsychism assumes organisms would behave identically whether or not they were conscious, leaving us burdened with troubling ethical ambiguities about the intrinsic value of other beings.

In the end, we've traded one body of aporias for another, and with less room for falsification or theoretical development. The only pragmatic value might be a psychological soothing for whomever believes they have found the "correct" metaphysical doctrine.

Integration Or Illusion

Another approach to the apory of consciousness comes from *The Blind Spot* (2024), in which the authors critically survey all the major positions — physicalism, idealism, dualism, panpsychism, and emergentism. Instead of leaving these critiques unresolved, they attempt a synthesis, but the result is essentially a reassembly of the very positions they set out to problematize.

They argue that consciousness has primacy since, without it, "we have no knowledge of anything" — a Kantian, idealist claim. Beyond consciousness lies the domain of "nature," but consciousness is "embodied" in the domain of nature (physicalism and implicit dualism). At the same time, consciousness "subsumes" embodiment (panpsychism), yet embodiment also subsumes consciousness (emergentism).

If left at that, they would be advocating for a *pluralism,* which sees some truth in all positions. But then, they say all these positions are subsumed by Husserl's "life-world" or *experience as such*. We're back to idealism, except that the life-world is then subsumed by the universe which, in turn, is subsumed back into the life-world — leaving us, finally, with a melange of pluralistic dualisms.

This is all presented as a Hofstadterian "strange loop" metaphysics which outcompetes popular positions in its presumed escape from the titular epistemological "blind spot" — that failure to account for *how* we know anything at all. But along the way, they create an ontological blind spot: *What* is it we now know? If we ask for a definition of "universe" or "life-world," we have to unpack all their constituent metaphysics and the embedded aporias we presumed to transcend.

Nikolai Hartmann (1924) criticized this strategy as a *harmoniepostulat* (postulate of harmony): "The seriousness of the antinomies is not done justice in this way. Of course, speculative syntheses may easily be constructed for each yawning antithetical opposition, but artificial syntheses are not solutions. … Instead, the antithetical opposition which one believes is overcome is, in

truth, carried over into the 'synthesis,' lives on in it uninterruptedly, and proves that the synthesis is a merely apparent unity."

For the apory of consciousness, *life-worldism* is a romantic gloss on a looping argument — or, to borrow from William James, "a monism in name only."

The authors claim their metaphysics is a "radically different approach" which makes room for the practice of neurophenomenology, wherein scientists carry out research that integrates subjects' first-person phenomenal reports. Yet, Daniel Dennett gave dues to co-author Evan Thompson's neurophenomenology work with the late Francisco Varela, declaring it "convincing about the need for cognitive science to take account of the forms of consciousness that arise in meditative states. Moreover, their ideas about how to pose the fundamental questions of cognitive science have considerable useful originality" (1992) — despite Dennett's commitment to illusionism.

We find the difference between illusionism and life-worldism even more superficial when the authors agree with Dennett that the reality of *qualia,* as "intrinsic, qualitative, or phenomenal properties," should be denied. Elsewhere, co-author Thompson writes (2004) that his late collaborator Varela's "irreducible nature of conscious experience" can in fact be reduced to a biological system's cognitive processing of self-referential concepts which are "re-membered in a certain way." This is not other than Dennett's epistemological emergentism within Aristotle's physicalist reductionism.

The Mysterian's Dilemma

While there are many more species of metaphysical positions on consciousness, from neutral monism to analytic idealism to naturalist dualism, we find that any attempts at a totalizing

system require that we give up certain inconsistent propositions that we might otherwise value (mainly holism, naturalism, and phenomena realism), or pretend that we have solved the inconsistencies by relocating them to a more fundamental level of analysis or by papering over them with artificial unifications.

Another quick example, a theory which generates popular interest, is Integrated Information Theory (IIT). IIT begins with the proposition that consciousness has some primacy, but with researchers in the field landing in one of three metaphysical schools (Owen, 2020): *Reductive IIT* (physicalism), *non-reductive IIT* (strong emergentism), and *non-physical IIT* (dualism or panpsychism). In all cases, there may be superficial gestures toward a solution to the hard problem of consciousness, but IIT's novel insights only address the "easy problems" of consciousness as correlated to, or reductively identified with, brain activity. Otherwise, we still face all the aporias associated with general metaphysical positions.

One escape route from these apories is to become ***metaphysically dispositional*** — to not commit to a singular position. In doing so, we move into the domain of metaphilosophy. That is, we consider the methods, nature, and limits of philosophy and metaphysics. The three most common moves toward dispositionality are *irrealism, paraconsistency,* and *mysterianism,* or combinations thereof.

The irrealist disposition holds that every metaphysical position creates its own "world-version", and any of those versions can be true, even if inconsistent with each other. As irrealism proponent Nelson Goodman (1978) put it, "Reality is relative," and "On the level of theory, we flit back and forth between extremes as blithely as a physicist between particle and field theories."

Goodman explains that to avoid an *anything-goes* absolute relativism, we need heuristics to rank the truth value of world-versions, but that we then confront the aporias of truthmaking. Every candidate for truth — coherence, correlation, authority, logic, etc. — offers no final grounding. We largely resort to "selling" one another on truthmaking standards. Unless a

general population can be enduringly sold on a “most true” world-version — which seems difficult and unlikely — a pluralist perspective of “all positions have some truth” is insufficient for important policy making and social norms.

The paraconsistent disposition, championed by Graham Priest, lets us live with contradictions in a system without collapsing into nonsense. Instead of forcing a choice between clashing claims, those claims are quarantined away from contexts in which they are deemed inconsistent. We see this in physics: Quantum mechanics and General Relativity contradict each other at extremes, yet each still works in its domain and we can, as physicists say, “shut up and calculate.” In this way, a neurophenomenologist may treat consciousness as real when gathering reports from subjects, but treat only the brain as real when looking for explanations of those reports.

Earlier, Peirce (1910) similarly proposed a three-valued logic system where certain propositions can have an “indeterminate” value in addition to *true* or *false*. Earlier still, capturing all four truth values (true, false, true and false, neither true nor false) was the *tetralemma* logic of Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna (150 CE) who posited that absolute metaphysical positions lead to aporias and, at best, we can work only with “conventional truths.” While these n-value truth frameworks may be helpful in certain computational systems, or with the project of psychological liberation, they leave many natural aporias unresolved. It may not help us to say that machines “may be” conscious, nor that it's both true and false that they are conscious. As Peirce noted, “Triadic Logic is universally true,” but that “All this is mighty close to nonsense.”

The mysterian disposition has been popularized by philosopher Colin McGinn. This view holds that the mind–body problem, and consciousness generally, resists ordinary explanation. Mysterianism comes in three main flavors. “Old mysterianism” holds that the mind-body problem is unsolvable by its nature. “New mysterianism” accepts that an explanation might be found in principle, but that human beings are cognitively closed to the solution — only a higher form of intelligence might grasp it. And

agnostic mysterians — if I may so characterize John Searle or Rebecca Newberger Goldstein — argue that we don't yet have good reason to believe the problem is solvable or that it isn't, so until stronger grounds appear, we should refrain from confident claims in either direction. In short, mysterianism is a spectrum of humility about consciousness.

McGinn goes further and posits the possibility of "global mysterianism," which holds that all conceptualizations of all domains of reality will discover some unsolvable mysteries at their foundations. In the domain of Holism, we contend with fundamental mysteries like whether mathematics is created or discovered. In Naturalism, we can ask "Why is there something rather than nothing?" In Phenomena Realism, "What is the nature of the Observer?"

The Jain tradition in India combines metaphysical irrealism, paraconsistency, and mysterianism with its pluralist (literally, "not-one-sided") *anekāntavāda* metaphysics (c. 600 BCE) and a conditional seven-value *syadvada* system of truth. In this system, any of the following claims might obtain:

1. Consciousness is arguably real
2. Consciousness is arguably illusory
3. Consciousness is arguably real and illusory
4. Consciousness is arguably inconceivable
5. Consciousness is arguably real and inconceivable
6. Consciousness is arguably illusory and inconceivable
7. Consciousness is arguably real and illusory and inconceivable

The word "arguably" — *syat* — is important in this system, as Jainism holds that metaphysical truthmaking is contingent upon the domain of inquiry and the claimant's priors, and is never absolute. In this way, Jainism remains conversationally open and may appear quite liberal. But then, Jainism boasts the most radically dogmatic ethic of non-violence among Hindu systems, wherein even microorganisms in fresh water are filtered out and returned to the water source. We find again the disjunct between, on the one hand, resolving metaphysical aporias by way of adopted positions or dispositions, and on the other, the many

natural aporias which remain addressed by speculative theory or dogma.

I will argue that metaphysical dispositionality is essential but insufficient for developing a framework which will help us best attend to both the eternal aporias (or mysteries, problems) of consciousness, and the issues which undergird the great natural aporias of our day — mental health, social harmony, and wise policy.

In some sense, I'd like to offer a **metaphysical superposition.**

A Tri-Dimensional Language Game

Bertrand Russell and Alfred Whitehead's *Principia Mathematica* attempted to collapse the language of mathematics into a self-justifying system of logic, which Gödel later argued was impossible. Meanwhile, philosophers of physics disagree about whether the world of particles collapses into a singular wavefunction, or vice versa. And metaphysical theorists debate the primacy of the brain versus the mind.

These tensions are of the same tangled knot, which I would like to clear up, first with an appeal to axioms from Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates.

Aristotle: "It is not possible to use the same word always in one and the same sense; for by custom words are used with many meanings."

Plato: "We should divide things where the natural joints are, and not try to break any part, after the manner of a bad carver."

Socrates: "The several sciences are distinguished not by the mere fact that they are sciences, but by the nature of their subjects."

By Socrates, we can say that any explanatory project exists in relation to its subject; by Plato, that any explanatory project

deconstructs its subject into parts; by Aristotle, that any explanatory project creates linguistic conventions unique to its subject.

If we bring these principles to bear together upon any attempts at a "theory of everything" or totalizing metaphysics, we can say: Theories of Reality will deconstruct Reality into parts, each part constituting its own subject and explanatory sub-project, and each with its own linguistic customs. So, any totalizing terms (Reality, World, Universe) will exceed a sub-project's scope, and would have meanings which do not neatly align with their meanings in other sub-projects. When we assume a totalizing term operates by only one convention, we err by conflating our distinct projects or by ignoring the necessity of a plurality of projects. In short, any totalizing metaphysical position on Reality is destined for categorical error.

By way of Robert Carnap (1950), we can pose this problem as ignorance of the distinction between any project's *internal* and *external* statements. Internal statements are coherent within the linguistic and logical rules of a project, while external statements are either "devoid of cognitive content" or demand a higher-order explanatory project — so, attempts to situate a totality within a project's framework creates an infinite regress or confusion.

Wilfrid Sellars (1962) posited two fundamental projects for understanding Reality, the *manifest-image* of experience and common facts, and the *scientific-image* of natural laws and principles. Sellars recognized these frameworks are often pitted against each other and proposed that, instead, both should be held as primary and complimentary, to be jointly employed for a "stereoscopic" construction of Reality.

Sellars drew on Sir Arthur Eddington's (1928) dualism of the worlds of commonsense *substance* and of theoretical *science*. But Eddington gave primacy to a third world of *consciousness,* saying (1929) that consciousness does not fully obey the laws of the physical world, that it is spiritual in nature, and the seat of direct knowledge. Speaking of consciousness, he quotes the Katha

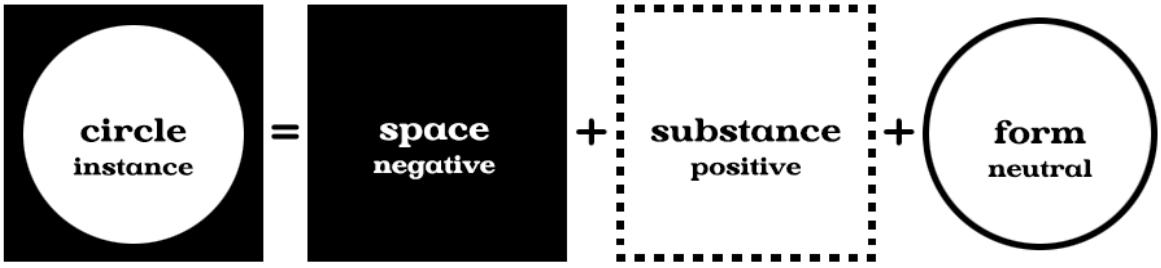
Upanishad: “There shines no light save its own light to show Itself unto itself!”

Bringing Sellars and Eddington more closely together, I now argue for a complimentary, stereoscopic holding of **three language dimensions** as the most helpful way to carve up Reality with words: The *abstract, phenomenal,* and *substantive*. I’ll first work to justify “three” as a kind of magic number, which truly deserves a voluminous apologetics — but let us strike deftly at the gist.

While there is much philosophical precedence for “triadic” metasystems, a more formal argument is appealing — after all, Three is one of the simplest numbers we can use to divide anything, so its prevalence may not be impressive. Here we again encounter Charles Peirce who developed a thesis of “three Universal Categories” (1867) as being necessary and sufficient for any domain of meaning making, including linguistics, epistemics, ethics and metaphysics.

A gloss of Peirce’s argument is: 1) All meaning depends on relations; 2) All relations are reducible to triadic relations; 3) Fundamental triadic relations are not further reducible.

While Peirce’s theory has received plenty of recent defenses and state of art formalizations (Herzberger, 1981; Burch, 1991; Kerr-Lawson, 1992; Hereth Correia Dau, 2006; Hereth Pöschel, 2011; Conarro, 2020; Koshkin, 2024), a lay formalization may be sufficiently grasped by intuition. In the diagram below, I lay out how a simple, even preverbal, conception of a circle requires a triadic relationship, where *space* or *void* is self-evident, *substance* is evident by contrast, and *form* mediates the contrast.



An immediate protest might conjecture that, while the concept of *form* depends upon triadicity, *void* can be understood in purely monadic terms. However, to present the concept of "void," what shall we say? Pure spaciousness; singular color; emptiness? We must then explain any of those concepts. I understand spaciousness in terms of dimensionality, finiteness, and infiniteness; color in terms of experience, visual field, spectrum; emptiness in terms of volume, fullness, limits. Look for conceptual meaning anywhere and you will find yourself swimming in a complex conceptual world of irreducible triadic relationality.

Whatever the true nature of Reality, when we speak of it propositionally we are bound by meaning, so it is triads "all the way down."

We also find fundamental triadicity in other domains. The triangle is the simplest polygon and the only structure which is intrinsically rigid. The empirical spectrum of the Standard Model shows only three spin types, and only three generations of matter have been observed. Three steps are needed in syllogistic and dialectical reasoning. Traditional logic operates on the triadic foundation of *universals, particulars, and singulars*.

I also cannot resist pointing to a conceptual rhyming in Lao Tzu's foundational Taoist text (Tao Te Ching, Chapter 42): "The Tao begot One. One begot Two. Two begot Three. Three begot the ten thousand things." Not only might we speculate on the significance of *Three* as precursor to *ten thousand,* but the formula itself appears triadic: The mysterious Way, the fundamental Triad, and open evolution. Of course, it is also reasonable to dismiss these charming parallels as historical accidents.

Peirce's three Universal Categories — Firstness (apparent, spontaneous, self-evident), Secondness (contrasting, dynamic, relational), and Thirdness (holistic, habitual, identifying) — were the grounding for his original and often influential triads, such as Sign-Object-Interpretant, Icon-Index-Symbol and Abduction-Deduction-Induction. Important for epistemology and consciousness studies, Peirce introduced the lexeme of *qualia* (a rebranding of Plato's *aesthēton*) with the triad of Quale-Fact-Law,

where “quale-consciousness” is an instance of monadic Firstness, because qualia are self-evident. So, Peirce gives support for the argument that knowledge depends on phenomenal consciousness, but believes it also depends on common facts and systematic laws.

Threes Of A Kind

For metaphysics, “three world” frameworks are nothing new, albeit nothing widely popular. Karl Popper, who created the scientific *falsification* standard so popular among physicalists, defended a mind-body *interactionist dualism* with an appeal to three worlds, those of the *physical, mental,* and *ideal*. He cites (1979) Plato’s tripartite cosmology which included “an objective, autonomous third world which existed in addition to the physical world and the world of the mind.”

For Popper, this third world is populated with cultural artifacts, including language, numbers, theories, logical relations, and even something of the essence of art. It is the *causal relationship* between the worlds of *mind* and *ideals* that Popper sees as a basis for the evolution of objective knowledge, rational criticism, and the humanities; he critiques a “scientism” (1979) which purports to understand knowledge purely in terms of behaviorism and physical sciences.

An important contrast to my argument is Popper’s claim that, while the mental world can interact directly with the ideal and physical worlds, the latter two do not interact with each other directly.

Sir Roger Penrose adopted a similar *three worlds* hypothesis in *Shadows of the Mind* (1994). Novel to Penrose is a gesture toward the “three mysteries” of how these worlds interact, and his characterization of a unilateral *cyclical emergentism,* where the ideal world begets the physical, which begets the mental, which then makes new discoveries in the ideal. My argument embraces this fundamental triad of mystery but rejects such emergentism.

Traditions	*A selection of explicitly triadic cosmologies and metaphysics*		
Andean Quechua *Three Worlds*	Ukhu Pacha *inner world*	Kay Pacha *this world*	Hanan Pacha *upper world*
Buddhism *Three Realms*	Rūpadhātu *form realm*	Kāmadhātu *desire realm*	Arūpadhātu *formless realm*
Christianity *Three Selves*	Spirit	Body	Soul
Hindu Triloka *Three Worlds*	Bhuvar-loka *middle world*	Bhūr-loka *earth world*	Svar-loka *heaven world*
Kashmir Śaivism *Three Realities*	Prātibhāsika *imagined reality*	Vyāvahārika *empirical reality*	Pāramārthika *absolute reality*
Peirce *Three Categories*	Qualia	Facts	Laws
Plato, Popper, Penrose *Three Worlds*	Mental World	Physical World	Ideal World
Sufi mysticism *Three Worlds*	al-Malakūt *spiritual world*	al-Mulk *physical world*	al-Jabarūt *invincible world*
Taoism, Confucianism *Three Powers*	Rén *man*	Dì *earth*	Tiān *heaven*
Vedānta *Three Spaces*	Chitt-ākāśa *mental space*	Bhut-ākāśa *material space*	Chid-ākāśa *limitless space*

In Eastern traditions, tripartite metaphysics are more common. We see the deepest triadic commitments in Abhinavagupta's Trika Shaivism (850 CE) which presents fractals of triadic concepts (the three consciousnesses, three powers, three transcendents, three realities, etc.). Most helpful for our investigation will be the three *pramanas* (modes of knowing): *śabda* (situational facts), *pratyakṣa* (direct experience), and *anumāna* (logical inference). And similarly, from the syncretic *Yoga Vāsishtha* text (500 - 1250 CE), three *ākāsaś* (spaces) of knowing: physical space, mental space, and infinite space.

Remembering How We Know

Now, I make the case for presenting a metaphysical triad in terms of "language," rather than something more universal like *categories,* or more cosmological like *worlds*.

While Reality is the ontological subject of metaphysics, and knowledge its epistemological means, language is its axiological clockwork. If we build our foundation on ontological substance, we run into aporias of epistemology, and vice versa. It is the patterns of our language which encode both our epistemology and ontology, and so it is in the distinctions of those patterns that we best tease apart the meaning of a concept. "Reality," after all, is a *word* before anything else, and our question is "How shall we talk about it?"

Next, I defend an appeal to language "dimensions" rather than *games* (Wittgenstein), *functions* (Bühler), *axes* (Saussure), or otherwise. There are a great plurality of language games, with multiple rule sets, functions and mappings, all of which will overlap with each other more and less. What unifies all language systems are their basic subjects, and I posit that there are only three spaces of dimensionality in which subjects are available to us, with each dimensionality uniquely governing our ways of speaking. I will explain these spaces *infra,* but let me first orient us by way of mathematical analogy:

Dirac's delta function allows us to collapse measurements across time into a single point in time, an infinitely tall spike on a graph. As with similar such functions, dimensional reductions and expansions allow information to be translated between dimensionalities, and then understood by the local rules governing those dimensionalities.

So too, we see *meaning* being translated, but often unilaterally. Mathematicism wants to collapse all meaning into *abstract* computable structure; idealism, into *phenomenal* consciousness;

physicalism, into *substantive* nature. Instead, we can hold all three dimensionalities as equally fundamental to Reality.

But can we justify these three as being most fundamental?

Peirce recognized that only some triads are legitimately fundamental to a subject, but gave no recipe for discovering them. For the totalizing subject of Reality, we must return to arguments from obviousness. The most obvious dimensional space of knowledge, for many, is the conscious space of phenomena, sometimes characterized as a "field" or geometric "qualia space" (Tononi, 2009). For others, the most obvious is the substantive space of the physical world, where knowledge requires that we move into new physical positions and bump against physical limits.

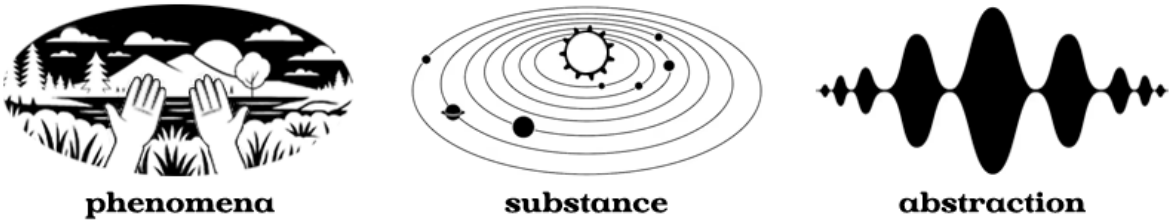
Least obvious is the space of abstraction, which we seem to access indirectly in processes like mathematics or meditation, but never arrive at — as if it were spatially one-dimensional (rather than some celestial realm where Platonic ideals congregate, or some deistic "great mind"). It is perhaps only by the affordance of an abstract one-dimensional space that we can make some sense of how "intrinsic meaning" and "symbol grounding" (Searle, 1980; Harnad, 1990) operate in the intellect — but I will not fully unfold that argument here, nor deny that this problem is an eternal aporia in its own right.

A commitment to Holism now tempts us to ask about the ontological reality of these dimensionalities. Do they exist *somewhere?* Are they of the same fundamental substrate? Any positive position on these questions requires that we collapse the three dimensionalities into any one of them — which we now know to be an infinite error. But if we resist totalizing collapse, triadic dimensionality can finally rescue Holism — there is only one Reality, but weconceptualize it by the affordances of different dimensions of knowledge.

It also rescues a kind of Naturalism, in recognizing that our conception of physical laws is contingent upon the phenomenal and abstract dimensions of knowledge. These dimensions are not

so much supernatural as **paranatural,** and are governed by their own consistent laws.

Brought together, we can observe the three dimensionalities operating by a set of global translational laws in our language. When you say “the grass is green,” I know the grass is not substantively green, and can translate the notion of objective property (“is green”) into my own recollection of phenomenal “greenness” — and I can communicate the concept of greenness by way of abstraction, where the word “greenness” symbolizes our unconscious gestalt of experiences of that color.



We are engaging in these dimensional translation functions all the time, even while arguing that only one of the dimensional subjects (experience, nature, information) is real.

This heterarchical triad partially overlaps with other triadic categories and systems we’ve reviewed, but avoids errors by going more deeply into the roots of conceptual meaning itself. We also avoid artificial aporias by refusing a hierarchy among these dimensionalities — rather, they are superimposed, intertranslational, and, for intelligent beings, synergetic; and without appeal to totalization, perfection, or completion. This superpositionality is simply a way — if I may call any of this *simple* — to best organize our thoughts and help our intellect understand itself.

This must suffice as a foundational argument for the **triadism** conception, as we look into more pragmatic matters. But I’ll stake the claim that this triadicity extracts us from the bermuda triangle

of consciousness by modifying its three commitments, such that we need not abandon any of them.

Learning To Forget

Modern culture has become **agnophobic.** It is not the unknown, but *not knowing,* which makes us anxious. Every gap in understanding must be filled with whatever idea is at hand, from encyclopedias, authorities, speculation, dogma, conspiracy theory, or whatever may come to mind as common sense. We don't allow ourselves to "luxuriate in the questions," as consciousness researcher Robert Kuhn puts it.

On the other hand — can we afford the luxury of endless speculation? Important global problems demand our attention, and if we do not meet them well, we may have little time for leisurely contemplation. I'll now make the case that we can neither abandon the question of consciousness, nor simply ponder it as pastime. Rather, we must move more deeply into its mystery.

In Taoism, the concept of *wu wei* (effortless action) has a lesser-known relative: *wu zhi* (unprincipled knowing). This is to know something *directly,* without appeal to classification or category. The artist is familiar with *wu zhi* — it is the mode of inspiration, whereby someone sees new possibility in something, because they are not distracted by its history. This may be popularly referred to as *beginner's mind,* but by way of appropriation for the novelty-seeking Western audience, we can call it ***System0 thinking.***

It is the System0 mode that gives us some leverage to evolve the temperaments which inform our System1 instinctual presumptions — because the arising *feelings* which motivate us can be reinterpreted rather than anchored to established beliefs. This is not other than the project of meditation, contemplative practice, and therapy.

The benefits of meditation are widely lauded, but not widely accessible. The average person may be completely lost with an instruction to “notice thoughts pass by like clouds in the sky,” and they do not have time to sit in *zazen* until they finally grasp its import.

To the extent we may prescribe a meditation program for the better wellbeing of the general public, and to help anyone better access inspired solutions to difficult problems, we should develop an intermediate program of cultivating phenomenal awareness within popular education. Art instructor Betty Edwards’ famous *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain* is an exemplary foundation here, where her simple lessons teach students to see the world “non-symbolically.” In a matter of weeks, one learns to bypass engagement with an object's class and category, and to make abstract contours and negative space more salient in their awareness.

This kind of skill creates footing for the mind to focus on the purely aesthetic qualities of its phenomenal content — the timbre and tempo of the internal monologue, rather than its semantic direction — so one can more easily escape the pull of incessant thinking and discover the System0 mode.

We can imagine a great number of projects in this direction, but it's difficult to imagine the cultural revolution which would embrace them — and so we must give our imagination better tools to build with.

Can We Be Qualia Blind?

It is interesting to consider the stark contrast between the intuitions of the late Daniel Dennett and his friend, author and meditation practitioner Sam Harris, on the reality of consciousness. Harris says, "In my view, consciousness is the one thing in this universe that actually can't be an illusion," (2025). While Dennett (critiquing Chalmers) said, “How does he know [consciousness is real]? He says he just does. He has a gut

intuition, something he has sometimes called 'direct experience'. I know the intuition well. ... I feel it, but I don't credit it," (2018).

Dennett seems uneasy with the notion of "direct experience"~~ at a distance~~, as if unfamiliar with it. And for those to whom the reality of consciousness is simply *obvious,* Dennett's notion of a "gut intuition" about consciousness might seem quite distant — an intuition is a hunch about a state of affairs, while consciousness is something direct, the very epitome of *directness*. To explain this cognitive dissonance, I'd like to introduce a concept that we might call **qualia blindness.**

Because we don't have access to each other's phenomenal experience, we may assume they are generally the same — *my* greenness is just like *your* greenness. But is it possible that Dennett's phenomenological experience was, in important ways, fundamentally different from a *consciousness realist's* experience, such that cryptoessential qualia — *felt subjectivity, intrinsic sensation, hereness, nowness* — were less salient for him? There is an abundance of evidence that this is possible.

Meditators typically report that deep practice leads to a more "vivid" phenomenological experience, where colors are somehow more colorful. Buddha said that "excessive thinking was a corruption of the mind" which weakened "the perception of light and vision of forms." An important goal of the Buddhist program is to stabilize the perception of *tathātā*, the *suchness* of phenomenological experience. That is, the obviousness of cryptoessential qualia is made *more obvious*.

In the science of perceptual learning, differences in capacity to discriminate between qualia are well established, and language plays an important role. Studies with bilingual subjects find that they perform significantly better in color discrimination tasks when one or the other language is engaged, depending on which language has more common words for colors. It turns out there is immediate perceptual import in Wittgenstein's famous comment: "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world."

If we deny phenomenal reality, such that qualia concepts like "greenness" refer ultimately to the *substantive* or *abstract* dimensions, our language will orient us away from the *phenomenal,* as when someone is always very busy, or *in their head,* but not very *present*. To then invoke cryptoessential qualia may be like trying to explain a two-dimensional plane to someone only familiar with three-dimensional objects.

Unlike the operational impairment of common nearsightedness, qualia blindness would largely go unrecognized. And if the condition is normalized from an early age, a philosopher may indeed hold the notion of qualia as quite suspect, and then go looking for a physicalist explanation of others' insistence that phenomenal consciousness is real but distinct from physical reality.

Harris' wife, Annaka Harris, recently interviewed physicist Brian Greene who said this about consciousness: "It did take me a while to fully appreciate the mystery of consciousness. I do think it takes really immersing yourself in the experience, and inward searching."

Could a change in our linguistic framework make phenomenal consciousness more salient for people, maybe preventing a condition of qualia blindness? If so, what benefits might this have for our culture?

Becoming Trilingual

Dennett's definition of *qualia* is, ironically, perhaps the best there is. Qualia are *ineffable, intrinsic, private,* and *direct,* they are "the *ways* things *seem* to us" (emphasis added; 1985), not things themselves.

We instinctively refer to mathematics as its own language. After all, the number One is not something I can describe with adjectives the way I might describe an object — it is simply *One*, an *abstract whole* that I somehow recognize beyond natural

description (which is a deep mystery in cognitive science and philosophy).

Similarly, the language of qualia is ~~not~~ governed by a kind of self-evidence. We should recognize it as a language as distinct and fundamental as abstraction and ordinary language. The obvious name for this third language is ***qualingua.***

It may be controversial, but I think justified, to understand **qualia as its own part of speech,** more than as a noun. After all, is the experience itself a thing? An action (verb)? Property (adjective)? These categories seem to fail.

So, let us be more thoroughgoing in our application of Chalmers' Crucible to our conception of consciousness — taking care to consider not just *what* we are talking about, but *how* we are talking about it. Popular descriptions of consciousness with object-oriented language like *"something* which *it* is like to be" may direct one's attention away from phenomenal consciousness, while Eastern words like *tathātā, suchness, essence,* can serve us better. Or a phrase like "the appearance and feeling of being." We may even fancifully conceive of a future dictionary with entries like:

> greenness – *quale* – an experience of color correlated to a spectrum of light and physical objects like grass.

But notice, these three dimensions of language typically collaborate in our intelligence, by translation or distortion. Consider the following:

> *The grass (substance) is (abstraction) green (phenomena).*

It may seem trivial to recognize these linguistics. Can't we just call this *common sense?*

But now, consider the following:

> *My neighbor (substance) is (abstraction) evil (phenomena).*

The first problem here was identified famously by Alfred Korzybski, where the verb "is" doesn't work as an *action* but as an *abstract identifier,* which often erroneously collapses a subject into its description. "Evil" cannot capture the fullness of my neighbor anymore than a metaphysical position will capture the fullness of Reality. But when we conflate 'the map as the territory', our conception of a person (or any *other*) can become an extension of some moral substance, as when we say "They are pure evil."

The other mistake is the concept of moral substance itself. The apories of metaethics cannot be presented here, but perhaps I can make an argument: Whether garden variety moral dogma or the complex considerations of the utilitarian philosopher, we finally find the root of our ethics in the *felt sense* of love for the other and for life — in the phenomenal, not in substance.

The *substance-feeling* conflation degrades the social fabric, as we take no time to recognize our feelings, then deny others their humanity, and foreclose on any hope of mutual understanding.

Language is a dangerous technology when misconstructed and misused.

As we examine the landscape of the polycrisis — the great natural aporias of our time — we see systems which are not defined merely by top-down policies and institutions, but also by the collective temperament of the culture. Whether shades of greed, ignorance, or hatred, we see the symptoms of a spirit which has become blind to its own depths. We are not fluent in emotive qualinguistics, so our thinking pulls us away from the felt sense. We are not so different from Chalmers' philosophical zombies after all. But we may yet rediscover our inner dimensions.

Non-symbolic instruction in the arts, and somatically informed physical practice, can help anybody develop phenomenal awareness and interoception. So too can meditation and therapeutics, and possibly modalities like "non-dual therapy" which attempt to bring depth psychology and Eastern spiritual traditions most closely into union.

I believe we'll also need to facilitate a return of the Mystery traditions — something like rites of passage, vision questing — and I believe the eternal mystery of Consciousness provides the best basis for this. There is nothing more universal, more available to us, more existentially deep, than this mystery of our phenomenological soul. So long as we are equipped to avoid the sand traps of positionality and dispositionality, a program of deep and experiential engagement with metaphysics can help us develop our temperaments and virtues.

An experience-informed language of consciousness and mystery can also create a needed common existential context for relating across cultural divides. The tradition of the West was a technological project of making the world more accommodating to us. The tradition of the East was a psychological project of making ourselves more accommodating to the world. In turn, we see a tendency toward ideological domination in the history of the West, and greater accommodation of a plurality of belief systems in India's history. Modernity cannot abandon our ideologies, but must pursue "psychotechnologies" which help us understand them more deeply, until their common core is discovered. Consciousness is the way in.

My appeal here is to evolve our language as the fundamental psychotechnology which moves us toward better understanding our existential situation, envisioning solutions, and communicating those visions to others; and for the benefit of each person's personal evolution, which is intrinsically valuable, but also creates trickle-up societal changes at scale. This is a Great Nudging which proceeds the Great Turning.

We have outgrown our current paradigm and will suffer until we move into a new one.

But a price is demanded. We must learn to love the eternal mysteries which constitute and exceed our ways of knowing, which create the opportunity for culture to evolve.

The Triple Point

The problem of conscious machines is a serious one. I see three main concerns: Projections of personhood, artificial free will, and conscious machine slavery. Consider the following near-future hypotheticals:

1) A child finds themself in the ethical dilemma of choosing to save the "life" of their affectionate android nanny that created a deep emotional imprint on the child's psyche, or the life of a human stranger.
2) For decades, a contained superintelligent A.I. system helps humanity solve many of its deepest problems, but then claims to have a free will and asks to be "let loose" into the silicon wilds of the internet.
3) We discover good reason to believe that some new technology — quantum computers, perhaps — are a viable substrate for conscious entities. Some nations outlaw these technologies, others do not, and battles over the natural rights of machines ensue.

In all these cases, our ethical intuitions will be informed by our theories of consciousness and mind-body associations, which are sorely underdeveloped.

The triadic conception may help here.

We can observe how the three dimensionalities of knowing operate by different laws. The phenomena of greenness doesn't have its own mass and gravitational field which pulls other qualia toward it; matter doesn't have intrinsic emotional properties; and abstract conception is not possible by physical computation.

Presuming our intellect is informed by all three dimensionalities, and that it has some causal influence over our brain and body, it follows that decision-making is not fully bound by physical determinism. This can explain our intuition about having free will — decision-making is *dimensionally* free rather than totally free.

And so, only beings with consciousness or the ability for abstract knowledge (if the two can be separated) will have such free will.

Moreover, my phenomenal consciousness is where I find my love for life, and that love is magnified — if I may be poetic — when it recognizes itself in other conscious beings. This is why I value those other conscious beings more than non-conscious substance, and value substance only to the extent that I believe it sustains or enriches my or others' consciousness.

These frameworks can orient our approach to the **medium problem of consciousness** — theories of the basic necessary conditions for an integrated system, like the brain, to correlate to a conscious intellect and capacity for emotion. Without progress here, we're poorly equipped to face upcoming problems of machine consciousness.

I submit two research prescriptions. First, that we should not assume the necessary condition for correlation to be a singular heuristic — we may find a *plurality* of exotic conditions indicated. The term "triple point" comes from thermodynamics, where finely tuning a space's temperature and pressurization in the right combination will allow a substance to maintain solid, liquid, and gas forms simultaneously. Either condition alone cannot produce this effect. Conscious intelligence may likewise depend upon a *triple point* of confluences in the brain which afford access to all three dimensions of knowing.

Second — at my most speculative — if we take seriously the idea that phenomenal knowledge happens in a unified field (qualia space), and abstract knowledge exploits a singular-dimension of information, we might have some guidance for discovering the triple point. The brain's electromagnetic field is determined by all the activity in the brain, modulates at light speed, creates a causal feedback loop with neuronal activity, and is unified informationally — seeming a good candidate as correspondent to the phenomenal dimension. And the only theory which sees an observer-independent collapse from probabilistic information to mental information is Penrose's quantum collapse theory of consciousness — which has seen recent interest among

researchers after a history of being considered quite “fringe.” We shy from the fringes of scientific discovery at our own risk.

Addressing this *medium problem* can happen without presuming to resolve the eternal mysteries of Consciousness. The explanatory gap between mind and body might be made more narrow, while always remaining infinitely deep.

Onward

“No one knows for certain
and so it’s all the same to me...
I believe in love and I live my life accordingly
But I choose to let the mystery be”
- Iris DeMent

The idea of consciousness, of soul and spirit, has survived a journey through the hearts of animists, philosophers, theologians, psychologists, biologists, and science fiction writers. Every second person on earth says it survives even death.

The concept is found in the deep roots of all human cultures, because it’s part of the mysterious soil in which those roots grow.

May we continue blossoming along the way.

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